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ABSTRACT

High turnover of rural practitioners is common among a range of human service professions in Australia. A longitudinal study surveyed 123 newly appointed rural social workers who had relocated to their new rural positions, using the same questionnaire every 3 months during an 18-month period. The study aimed to investigate rural recruitment and retention difficulties, examine culture shock and its impact on retention, and determine the applicability of a proposed model of adjustment. Variables included satisfaction with rural lifestyle, with current rural community, and with job; perceived well-being; perceived level of coping; productivity level; sense of belonging to community; state anxiety level; stressfulness of life events; and perceived level of depression. Respondents' mean expected duration of employment was 24 months, but the mean actual length of stay was 16.1 months. Premature departure and poor retention were related to employer-controlled factors. Consistent with the proposed model of adjustment, most variables displayed a U curve indicating an initial period of decreased well-being followed by increases in satisfaction. Recommendations are concerned with recruitment strategies, retention incentives, preservice preparation for generalist and community embedded practice, inservice training related to orientation of rural appointees, and improved personnel management practices. These findings are relevant to other human-services professionals such as teachers. (Contains 21 references.) (SV)

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Personal And Professional Adjustment Of Social Workers To Rural And Remote Practice: Implications For Improved Retention

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Abstract

High turnover of rural practitioners is common among a range of human service professions. This paper outlines the results of a longitudinal investigation of Australian social workers who started in rural positions in 1994-95. The study surveyed 123 newly appointed social workers that had geographically relocated to rural positions with an identical questionnaire every three months over an 18-month period. It investigated the nature of the adjustment process to the demands of rural practice and rural living, following a rural relocation. In particular, the study explored the relevance of the concept of a U Curve of adjustment, which postulates phases of disorientation, honeymoon, grief and loss, withdrawal and depression, and adjustment. The adjustment process is analysed for its effects upon the length of stay of workers, and their social and emotional well-being. Particular emphasis is given to results concerning respondents' satisfaction with their jobs, rural lifestyles and communities, stress levels, and depression. The study has relevance for a range of human services professions. The paper concludes by providing some recommendations concerning strategies for increasing retention.

Rural Australians experience significant disadvantage in accessing quality human services, including medical care, educational facilities, and social and welfare services, when compared to their urban counterparts (Cheers, 1990, 1998, p.29-37; HREOC, 1996, 1999). Rural professionals tend to experience the same sorts of lifestyle and practice issues (Montgomery, 1999). There has been long-standing difficulty in attracting and retaining experienced professionals across the human services (Boylan & King, 1991; Hayes, Veitch,

Cheers & Crossland, 1997; Kamien & Buttfield, 1990; Tate, 1993). Reasons cited for recruitment and retention difficulties include inadequate employer supports for relocation and rural practice, and personal and family issues stemming from rural relocation (Cheers, 1998, p.91-3). Despite the generally rapid growth in the health and welfare industries (Franklin & Eu, 1996; McDonald, 1999), including rural employment opportunities (Condliffe, 1991; Munn, 1990), significant recruitment and retention difficulties exist for Australian rural social workers (Cheers, 1998, p.191-193; Dollard, Winefield & Winefield, 1999; Lonne, 1990).

Lonne (1990) proposed that, following a rural relocation, professionals experience a process of social and emotional adjustment, which typically takes 12 to 18 months to complete. It has five phases, namely, Disorientation, Honeymoon, Grief and Loss, Withdrawal and Depression, and Re-organisation and Adjustment. Each phase is recognisable by its major symptoms. Whilst each phase is identifiable by the feelings and behaviours associated with it, not all workers experience every phase, nor each phase to the same degree. There is a large degree of commonality in the process for all practitioners, regardless of experience, job description and agency function, although some social workers are more likely than others to adjust successfully.

Aims and Designs

This paper examines results from a two-year longitudinal study of 194 social workers, 123 of whom relocated immediately prior to commencing rural positions in Australia in 1994-1995. Overall study aims were to: investigate recruitment and retention difficulties; examine the impacts of the 'culture shock' following relocation upon length of stay; and determine the applicability of Lonne's (1990) proposed process of adjustment. This paper focuses on the sub-sample of workers that relocated and provides support for the hypothesised adjustment process and its affects on length of stay. It also explores the implications for recruitment and retention of rural professionals.

All respondents completed an initial questionnaire shortly after commencing duties and a second questionnaire when they left their jobs or two years later, whichever came first. The 123 relocating respondents were also surveyed with an identical questionnaire every three months for 18 months. Mailed questionnaires were used, supplemented, where appropriate, by telephone interviews. Response rates exceeded 96.2% for all seven data-collection points because of high interest from respondents and telephone follow up. A pre-test resulted in acceptable alpha values for all instruments.

A social worker was defined as a person who is eligible for membership of the Australian Association of Social Workers and who is undertaking social work practice. Social work practice was defined as paid employment of a social worker, with one or more roles or duties in a practice field recognised in the social work profession. A rural community was defined as a bounded locality with a population of 76,750 or less, and located more than 100km from the relevant state capital (see Griffith, 1991). This population limit was set to ensure inclusion of several

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larger regional centres with well known recruitment and retention difficulties.

Findings

The Social Workers, their Jobs and Communities.

Most respondents were female (74.6%), who tended to be young (under 30 years) and single or never married, compared with males who were generally aged between 30 and 39 and more likely to be married or separated. Respondents revealed a fairly even spread between the age groups of 21-29 (36.3%), 30-39 (35.2%) and 40-49 (23.8%), with few aged above 50 years (4.7%). Combining age and prior experience: 25.1% were young (<30yrs) and inexperienced (<2yrs); 11.5% were young, though experienced; 37.3% were older and experienced; and 26.2% were older, though inexperienced. Most respondents (76.6%) had experienced more than 2 years of rural living before commencing their current positions.

Most practitioners lived in the same communities in which they worked. Around one-third were working in communities with less than 10,000 people, one-quarter in communities with between 10-25,000 and 25-50,000 population respectively, and approximately 10% in larger places with up to 76,750 people. The major employer was state government departments or instrumentalities (74.2%), with 7.2% in federal government agencies, 9.8% in non-government organisations and the remainder in local government and tertiary education institutions. Most positions (91.4%) were full-time. More than one-quarter of respondents (28.4%) were in temporary positions, 58.2% were permanent, and 13.4% were on time-limited contracts. Most employers (69.9%) did not provide practitioners with material or financial incentives to practice in their rural locations. Furthermore, most respondents (54.0%) had received poor preparation for rural work during their tertiary studies, and no or little information and advice (61.4%) from their employers about the positions and communities they were entering.

Contrary to popular beliefs, the majority of respondents (62.9%) had lived in rural, not urban, places immediately prior to taking up their current positions. Only 29.9% of relocatees had come from their present state capital city, with a further 12.2% relocating from another state capital. Most (41.7%) had relocated from other rural places with less than 50,000 people, although 15.7% had moved from non-capital cities with more than 50,000 people. The mean distance traveled in the relocation was 1394km, although this varied widely (sd = 1191km). Geographic isolation was generally evident, with 62.9% of respondents being more than 325km from larger centres with more than 100,000 population. Whilst most relocatees (56.2%) had received a financial contribution from their employers, on average this only met around 80% of their respective relocation costs. Nevertheless, despite reporting that they were worse off financially as a result of the move, respondents were overwhelmingly positive about their rural lifestyles and relocations, with 74.8% being either 'strongly in favour' or 'in favour'. Only 8.9% had regretted the move. Partners were similarly positive toward the move.

Motivations for Positions.

Respondents' mean expected duration of employment was 24 months (sd = 18.5 mths), with 33.7% expecting to stay up to 12 months, 32.1% between one and two years, and 34.2% more than two years. This latter group tended to have permanent or contract status. They were also more likely to be experienced practitioners, in supervisor or management positions, on higher salaries, and primarily motivated to take their positions by career advancement or material gains.

Respondents were principally attracted to their present positions because of their professional interests, career advancement, and the attraction of a rural environment. 'A strong desire to work in this practice field' was the most frequently reported primary motivation, and also figured highly amongst secondary and third motivations. A good fit between the position and respondents' professional skills was also frequently cited as a primary, secondary and third reason. The perceived advantages of rural practice and a rural lifestyle were prominent amongst secondary or third reasons, but were infrequently mentioned as primary motivations. Relocatees were also more likely to have taken the position because they preferred rural work and lifestyle, believed it was an ideal locale, had a partner who had a local job, or because it was their only job offer, rather than for other reasons.

Length of Stay.

The mean actual length of stay was 16.1 months, although this varied considerably (sd = 8.1 months). Around one-third of practitioners stayed up to twelve months (34.4%), between 13 and 24 months (32.8%) and more than two years (32.8%) respectively. However, the 31.0% of practitioners who had remained in their initial position at the two-year point, the 'stayers', had not yet completed their tenure, and often intended to stay longer. The 'retained leavers' (29.3%), on the other hand, had left their initial position but had remained with their original employer, albeit in a different position. The turnover rate is most accurately depicted by the 39.7% who had left both their position and employer, the 'non-retained leavers'. The expected duration of employment and the mean actual length of stay of these groups are presented in Table 1.

Multiple and logistic regression analyses were undertaken to identify factors contributing to practitioners' actual length of stay. Three retention categories were identified:

- premature departure – leaving the position before 75% of the particular practitioner's expected length of stay;
- retained – leaving the position between 75% and 125% of his or her expected length of stay; and
- enhanced retention –staying in the position more than 25% longer than initially anticipated.

All regression equations accounted for between 50% and 85% of total variance in the dependent variables. Premature departure and poor retention were related to employer-controlled, rather than personal factors. Employer variables included: temporary tenure; employment in non-government organisations (because these were generally unable to provide adequate incentives and supports); lower salary levels; inadequate access to training opportunities and useful administrative supervision; high levels of after-hours work; emotional exhaustion; and employment in specialist, rather than generic, positions. Personal factors contributing to premature departure were negative predisposition toward rural living and practice; low involvement in community activities; no, or few, local friends; being 30 years or older; and being male. Rural community factors included moderate or high visibility in the community, and living or working in communities with larger populations (>50,000).

Enhanced retention was related primarily to personal and community factors and, to a lesser extent, employer factors. Personal influences included a positive disposition toward rural practice and living; a positive attitude toward the relocation; relative youth; being experienced; having lots of local friends; and a moderate amount of involvement in community activities. Rural community factors included being within 200km of a city with over 100,000 population, living in a community with more than 10,000 people, and having only a moderate amount of visibility. Influential employer variables were provision of adequate incentives, professional supports and supervision, more than two hours of relocation advice and information, and higher levels of worker autonomy. Enhanced retention was also associated with the line manager being based more than 50km away. Practitioners in generic practice with more practice fields were also more likely to stay longer. A critical dynamic of successful rural practice was working within the context of strong professional and community support networks and being involved in local community activities, but not to an extent that involves high visibility, frequent after-hours interruptions and compromised privacy. Employer supports redress the material disadvantages of rural living, and enable the worker to contribute to, and benefit from, the lifestyle advantages of rural practice and living.

Adjustment Process.

Eleven key indicators of adjustment were measured over the 18-month period. The U curve of adjustment proposes that well-being initially decreases over the first 6 to 9 months when a period of depression is experienced, and is followed by increased well-being during the period of adjustment (Lonne, 1990). The SPSS General Linear Model analytical procedure was used, which is a MANOVA analysis that handles repeated-measures data, and within-subjects, mixed designs to examine differences in means as well as the influence of between-subjects factors and covariates (Bryman & Cramer, 1999, p.157-162; Kinnear & Gray, 1995, p.121-128; Morgan & Griego, 1998, p.215). Essentially, it determines whether there is a statistically significant degree of change in the dependent variable means over time and whether the between-subject factors demonstrate significant differences in means. Statistically significant changes in U curve adjustment variables were difficult to substantiate, because those who experienced the most severe adjustment were more likely to depart prematurely, thereby making it hard to detect statistical evidence for a rise in well-being in the latter stages of the adjustment period.

Satisfaction with Rural Lifestyle

This variable, along with the next four, was measured on a 7-point, ordinal scale. Results indicated a U curve trend, although the 8.5% drop in satisfaction levels between Time 1 (T1) and Time 4 (T4), and the 14.0% rise between T4 and T6 were not statistically significant. However, the 20.4% drop for those who left their position between T1 and their mean 10-month departure point was significant ($p = .001$). These results indicate that, although there was a discernible adjustment trend, it was only statistically significant for those who left their jobs. Furthermore, those who experienced the biggest decreases in satisfaction with their rural lifestyles tended to leave their positions.

Satisfaction with Current Rural Community.

There was a statistically significant 13.0% drop ($p = .012$) from T1 to T3 on this variable, but a non-significant 5.6% rise from T3 to T5. Once again, the 21.5% initial drop for those who left their positions was significant ($p = .007$), indicating that those who left tended to be dissatisfied with their local community. Factors associated with large drops in satisfaction included high levels of emotional exhaustion and after-hours work, and poor administrative supervision. Those who had smaller decreases in satisfaction were likely to have experienced more emphasis on rural issues during undergraduate training, two hours or more of employer-provided adjustment briefing, higher location incentives, and a positive relocation attitude. They also tended to be in medium-sized communities with between 6 and 15 local colleagues, and to have had a moderate involvement in community activities.

Satisfaction with Job.

In keeping with other studies (Dollard, et al. 1999), job satisfaction for these rural practitioners decreased during the initial period then leveled off over the 18-month period. The 20.0% decrease from T1 to T4 was significant ($p = .001$), but the decrease for those who left their jobs was even greater (28.6%). Similar influences to 'rural community satisfaction' were evident, as were positive influences from lower community visibility and more local friendships, and negative influences from work troubles and being co-located with a line manager.

Perceived Well-being

On the whole, this variable showed a general U curve with a statistically non-significant drop from T1 to T4 (8.2%), and a rise from T4 to T6 (9.6%). The 16.5% initial drop for leavers was significant ($p = .025$). There was a slight rise from T2 to T3 before a further fall to T4, which was not significant, but lends support to the proposed Honeymoon period (Lonne, 1990). Employer adjustment briefings, a positive relocation attitude, slight community involvement, between 6 and 15 local colleagues, and increased local friendships were again positive influences upon satisfaction levels. On the other hand, emotional exhaustion, no community involvement, poor employer supports, working in a job with mandatory authority and being a manager/supervisor were all associated with decreased satisfaction levels.

Perceived Degree of Coping.

As with perceived well-being, a quadratic trend was evident for coping levels (Coakes & Steed, 1997, p.141): an initial decrease, a subsequent increase, then a decrease, followed by another final increase. Nevertheless, an overall U curve was present. The 14.7% decrease from T1 to T5 was significant ($p = .007$), as was the 11.6% rise between T5 and T6 ($p = .011$). The rise from T2 to T3 before the dip to T5 lends further support to the notion of a honeymoon period occurring shortly after relocation. Respondents who tended to have large drops in coping ability included those who had experienced less emphasis on rural studies in their undergraduate courses, younger workers, the less experienced, temporary employees and those with initial negative dispositions toward rural living.

Productivity Level.

This factor showed a clear, though inverted, U curve trend. There was a 15.6% rise from T1 to T3 ($p = .004$) and an 8.3% drop from T4 to T7 ($p = .026$). The initial 6.7% rise in productivity levels for leavers, although not significant, suggested that those who adjusted poorly experienced a rise in performance levels that was much less than others. Employer incentives and relocation assistance were associated with higher productivity, whereas lack of experience with rural practice and rural living had the opposite effect, as did being co-located with a line manager.

Belongingness to Community.

The sense of belonging increased steadily in a straight, upward linear trend. There was a 31.4% increase from T1 to T4 ($p = .0001$), and a 28.0% rise ($p = .001$) for those who left their positions. These data confirm that rural job turnover does not result from community factors. Increased belongingness was associated with greater community involvement, more friends, greater community acceptance of the social work role, a rural-to-rural (rather than urban-to-rural) relocation, and a positive relocation attitude.

State Anxiety Level.

State anxiety moved in a quadratic trend. A 3.7% increase from T1 to T2 was significant ($p = .033$), but other rises and falls were not. The leavers experienced a large 13.2% rise in their anxiety levels over the study period ($p = .009$). Further analysis showed that those who adjusted poorly with respect to this variable tended to leave prematurely. Factors associated with increased anxiety included higher levels of trait anxiety and emotional exhaustion, increased age, less than two years rural living experience, and being co-located with a line manager.

Strain and Stressfulness of Life Stress Events.

These two variables displayed similar trends, indicating that relocation and the Disorientation phase are associated with high levels of stress and strain, which fall significantly over the first 6 months of rural residence. Stress levels were reduced by employer-provided adjustment briefing, managers being located somewhere else and having local friendships, whereas they were increased by poor access to training, emotional exhaustion and rapid organisational change.

Perceived Level of Depression.

This variable displayed a weak (inverted) U curve trend. There was a 5.7% increase in depressive symptoms from T1 to T4 ($p = .15$), and a 6.7% decrease from T4 to T6 ($p = .080$). Once again, the rise in depressive symptoms was significant ($p = .005$) for those who left their jobs, reinforcing the earlier suggestions that unsuccessful adjustment was associated with decreased well-being and premature departure. Employer adjustment briefing, rural-rural (rather than urban-rural) relocation, being young, single and female, having more local friends and higher community acceptance of the respondent's work role were all associated with decreased depressive symptoms.

Conversely, higher depression levels were related to a negative rural disposition or relocation attitude, high levels of emotional exhaustion and trait anxiety, and having a manager based in the community or nearby.

The Process of Adjustment.

In sum, there was general support for the proposed process of adjustment, albeit with some qualifications. Whilst many variables displayed either a U curve or an inverted U curve trend, the changes were not always statistically significant. Those who left their positions generally experienced greater (and statistically significant) changes during the initial period of decreased well-being. Undoubtedly, their absence during the period of adjustment made identification of significant rises in later well-being much less likely for the group as a whole.

Recommendations

This study has demonstrated support for a U curve process of adjustment for rural relocatees on a number of variables and has implications for their recruitment and retention.

- High turnover has to be acknowledged as an 'employer' rather than a 'rural community', 'rural living' or 'personal' problem.
- Employers and practitioners need to recognise that a U curve of adjustment exists and is potentially detrimental for some. They also need to implement strategies to address issues that arise during the adjustment period.
- This study has found that there is, in Australia, a pool of experienced and committed rural social workers that prefer rural work and move from one rural job to another. They should be specifically targeted in recruitment strategies.
- Better educational preparation for the demands and rewards of generalist and community-embedded practice is required.
- As well as the usual information about the position, recruitment packages should also include information about the community. These should highlight features of the locale; position characteristics, especially the field/s of practice; and the financial and other material incentives on offer. Packages should present the job as an opportunity for a positive change of lifestyle.
- Enhanced employer incentives and benefits aid recruitment and retention by increasing applicant motivation and commitment. Relocation costs should be reimbursed or highly subsidised.
- Rural appointees should be provided with in-service preparation, including detailed information and discussion about the position, the community and its dynamics, and relocation and adjustment issues, prior to commencing duties.
- The overuse of temporary tenure is counterproductive and should be curtailed.
- Managers and supervisors need to provide more useful and regular administrative supervision and better access to training, and reduce excessive after hours-work
- There should be regular review of employee well-being to ascertain areas for assistance and enhance practitioner success and impact.
- Employers can provide more opportunities for professional autonomy and responsibility, and increased promotional and career-advancement opportunities

Conclusion

There is support for the hypothesised U curve process of adjustment following relocation to a rural community. During the first 18 months, there is an initial period of decreased well-being followed by increases in satisfaction. Many practitioners experience significant personal and professional problems, and these contribute to high turnover. This study has been an initial attempt to explore these difficulties, but much more research is needed. It has demonstrated that employers and practitioners can implement effective strategies to decrease turnover and increase retention. Rural citizens deserve the same access to qualified human-services professionals that most city dwellers take for granted. Social justice demands nothing less.

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Table 1: Expected and Actual Length of Stay

Length-of-Stay Group	Mean Initial Expected Job Duration (Months)	Mean Actual Length of Stay (Months)
Non-Retained Leavers	20.4	12.1
Retained Leavers	21.5	13.2
Stayers	31.7	24.2
Total	24.0	16.1

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